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Title: 'That heartbroken island of incestuous hatred': Famine and family in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*

Date: 2011

Originally published in: *Neo-Victorian families: Gender, sexual and cultural politics*

Example citation: Fegan, M. (2011). 'That heartbroken island of incestuous hatred': Famine and family in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*. In M-L. Kohlke, & C. Gutleben (Eds.), *Neo-Victorian families: Gender, sexual and cultural politics* (pp. 321-341). Amsterdam, Netherlands and New York, NY: Rodopi.

Version of item: Author's post-refereed pre-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/337315>

**“That heartbroken island of incestuous hatreds”:  
Famine and Family in Joseph O’Connor’s  
*Star of the Sea***

Melissa Fegan

**Abstract:**

Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea* (2002), uses an extended family – the Merridiths, Duanees and Mulveys – crossing class, religious, cultural, ethnic and political divides, to explore the failure of personal, local, national and international networks to save vulnerable individuals during the Great Famine of 1845-52. O’Connor’s novel is written in the context of a continuing debate about Ireland’s place in the family of nations – not just in terms of Ireland’s relationships with Britain and with America in the nineteenth century, but also in terms of the surge in immigration to Ireland at the end of the twentieth century. The rise of xenophobia and racism, combined with debates about the rights of refugees and the Irish-born children of migrant parents, invite comparisons with the experiences of the Irish diaspora. The novel plays with form (including newspapers, diaries, abandoned novels, ballads, images, and chapter epigraphs taken from contemporary letters), and explores the ways in which the myths and realities of Famine and emigration have shaped contemporary Ireland and ideas of national identity.

**Keywords:** burial practices, diaspora, emigration, family, Great Famine, immigration, Ireland, Joseph O’Connor, refugees, *Star of the Sea*.

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In her inaugural speech as President of Ireland in December 1990, Mary Robinson pledged herself to representing “a new Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive”, and one that would reclaim “the extended Irish family abroad” (Robinson 1990). Her official residence, Áras an Uachtaráin, would serve as a symbolic home for the 70 million people living outside Ireland who claimed Irish descent; a light was placed in the window, as “the simple emblem of [...] the inextinguishable nature of our love and remembrance on this island for those who leave it behind” (Robinson 1995). Five years later, in an address to the Irish Houses of Parliament, she renewed her commitment to “cherishing the

diaspora”, which was both “one of the treasures of our society”, in terms of the opportunities for “contribution and adaptation” it offered Irish people abroad, and a private tragedy: “No family on this island can be untouched by the fact that so many of our young people leave it. The reality is that we have lost, and continue every day to lose, their presence and their brightness” (Robinson 1995). Between the Great Famine of 1845-52 and the rise of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ in the mid-1990s, mass emigration became a fact of life for Irish families. The Irish novelist Joseph O’Connor, born in Dublin in 1963, describes the ingrained expectation in the mid-1980s that he, and almost everyone he grew up with, would soon be leaving:

We knew all about our country’s unique history of emigration. Famine, depopulation, the coffin ships, the ghettos of Kilburn and Boston, the statistics, the lists, the death of the Irish language, the way emigration became a tradition in Ireland, not just a phenomenon, but actually a way of life. It had been a way of life for our parents’ generation and now it was a way of life for us, too. The day we graduated, we practically got handed a plane ticket to London along with our degree. (O’Connor 1996: 137-138)

Emigration from Ireland did not begin with the Famine, but that disaster signalled a huge cultural shift, for both those who left and those who stayed. Prior to the Famine, emigration was the preserve of the able-bodied and relatively wealthy; after 1847, emigration was “the last refuge of a desperate population who believed that their only hope of survival lay outside Ireland” (Kinealy 1994: 299). The pre-Famine Irish system of subdivision of land between children gave way to impartible inheritance where one son would succeed, inevitably producing familial tensions; children who did not inherit or receive dowries were often accorded an inferior status, not only within the community but within their own families, and had no choice but to emigrate (Ó Gráda 1993: 180-206; Fanning 2004: 76). Robinson’s emphasis on cherishing the diaspora gestures towards the often disadvantaged and excluded condition of those who had emigrated in the past; the “extended Irish family”, even if eventually successfully adapted, had been alienated by home and host alike. Post-Famine,

they also carried the scars of separation and trauma. Unlike O'Connor's generation, who could fly back from London or New York for Christmas, or even the weekend, those who emigrated in the nineteenth century were unlikely ever to return. The tradition of the 'American Wake', the ritual mourning by family and friends for the emigrant, suggested the permanency of the severance (Baucom 2000: 139). In the aftermath of the Famine, emigration became “a second death, a more gradual but no less inexorable destruction of culture and social relations” (Lloyd 2008: 67).

This was reflected in Irish literature very soon after the Famine. Thomas O'Neill Russell's anti-emigration novel *The Struggles of Dick Massey; or, the Battles of a Boy*, published in Dublin in 1860, stresses that the symbolic death of the emigrant was frequently followed by actual death during the journey or shortly after arrival:

Multitudes greater than ever shall be known have whitened the great floor of the Atlantic with their bleached bones. Multitudes as great have laid them down in their long sleep by the far off fever and ague-stricken shores of the St. Lawrence and Mississippi; or lingered out a miserable existence as the dross of humanity amongst those who hated, pitied, feared, or wondered at them. (Russell 1860: 66)

In 1861 David Power Conyngham's novel *Frank O'Donnell: A Tale of Irish Life* threatened a spectral vengeance on the landlords, who had forced the peasants to emigrate, and on the government that had connived at their destruction: “Ah! the millions of corpses that rot in pauper graves, that are tossed about by the ocean waves, or that sleep in far off lands, slain by the miasma of some pestilential swamp, will yet rise up in judgment” (Conyngham 1861: 56). Even more disturbing than the actual death of the emigrant is the decay of their humanity, in their dislocation from “all the ties of home, [...] all fond family associations” (Conyngham 1861: 55), and the horrific destruction of social relations signalled by the Famine:

Hunger and wrongs turn people soon into beasts; [...] men who might have been thought incapable of any

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cruelty, actually trampled down and walked over feeble women and children in their eager haste to secure the food which was thrown at them by brutes in the shape of men. (Russell 1860: 166-167).

Landlords and governments might have been expected to abandon and neglect, but the failure of neighbours, friends and family members to help each other was still more shocking. Irish historians have noted the partial and selective memory of Famine survivors and their descendants; no one wanted to admit that members of their own family had been admitted to workhouses, or had been reliant on a soup-kitchen, or had died of starvation and been buried in a mass grave (Donnelly 2001: 37-38). Cormac Ó Gráda suggests that the tendency in folk memory to underestimate the impact of the Famine in one's own area is "an echo of a half-forgotten, subconscious communal scruple about famine deaths", and the failure of local and familial support networks (Ó Gráda 1999: 206). The shame of not having buried the dead properly – with all the rituals of last rites, wake and funeral – is a particularly painful omission:

The collective memory of the Famine repeatedly approaches and draws back from images of corpses buried in canvas sacks rather than in coffins, of bodies left to rot in collapsing cabins, of bodies tumbled together in lime pits, of bodies left to rot along the roads, and, as the gathering figures for all these accounts of dead matter out of place, of bodies that either fester in the holds of the "coffin ships" that carried the Famine emigrants to the Americas or tumble from the decks of these vessels to the unplaceable depths of the Atlantic Ocean. (Baucom: 2000: 132)

Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2002), set on a ship carrying Famine emigrants to New York in 1847, is framed by two such burials. The novel's preface, supposedly the Prologue to G. Grantley Dixon's *An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847*, describes a departing family which abandons their father, dying of famine fever, on the quayside. Their mother dies on the

ship’s foredeck, and the children beg the captain to take her body to America, as they cannot afford a burial, and cannot bear the shame of leaving her body on the wharf. The kindly captain allows them to keep the body, but once at sea they must “discreetly” throw her overboard:

Her people had to do it themselves. [...] They had disfigured her face terribly with some kind of blade, fearful that the current would drift her back to Crosshaven where she might be recognised by her former neighbours. (O’Connor 2003: xvii)

By the end of the twenty-six-day journey, ninety-five of those on board have been consigned to the depths, including one of the First-Class passengers, Earl David Merridith of Kingscourt, who, like the nameless woman, has been terribly disfigured with a blade, his throat “so severely cut that the head was almost completely separated from the body” (O’Connor 2003: 377). However, Merridith has been mutilated before death; he has been murdered, apparently for his failure to protect his tenants in Galway against starvation and eviction. The bankrupt Merridith has paid the passage of 7,000 tenants to Quebec – a less expensive and notoriously more disease-prone journey than the one he and his family are taking to New York,<sup>1</sup> but nevertheless at a cost which would have kept his family for two years. He has acted well compared to other local landlords, yet his former tenants have forced Pius Mulvey, another passenger on the *Star of the Sea*, to agree to murder Merridith before the ship docks. The irony of Merridith’s situation does not escape Mulvey:

A landlord and an Englishman; therefore an enemy of the people. A landlord without land; an Englishman born in Ireland – but there was little enough point in seeking definitions. For his class, his genealogy, the crimes of his fathers, for the pedigree bloodline into which he had been born. [...] The family tree had grown into his gallows. (O’Connor 2003: 28-29)

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kerby A. Miller, in 1847 “at least 30 percent of those bound for British North America and 9 percent of those sailing to the United States perished on the ‘coffin ships’ or shortly after debarkation” (Miller 1985: 292).

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Eve Patten identifies *Star of the Sea* as one of a number of contemporary Irish novels seeking to filter into popular consciousness the revisionist controversy which has occupied Irish historians since the 1980s:

such novels convey the confidence with which a recent generation of writers, drawing on tactics of subversion and irony, has tackled not only the matter but also the *status* of Irish history, updating the historical novel – already a strong player in the Irish canon – towards a contemporary ideological non-conformism. (Patten 2006: 263)

O'Connor challenges the enduring nationalist version of the Famine, in which the English government was responsible for the deaths of up to two million people because of its failure to prevent exports of food from a starving country and its sole reliance on poorhouses and public works to relieve mass distress. Roy Foster argues that the iconoclastic revision of "the received truths of conventional Irish historiography" was often most heavily resisted by *émigrés*: "With emigrant communities everywhere, the memory of homeland has to be kept in aspic" (Foster 1993: xiii). *Star of the Sea*'s penultimate chapter purports to be an extract from *A Miscellany of the Ancient Songs of Ireland*, published in Boston in 1904, focusing on the ballad 'Revenge for Connemara', which "hails from the ancient bloody times of resistance, when priest and people stood fast together against alien murder and rapine":

Come all ye native Galway boys and listen to my  
song;  
It's of the tyrant Saxon and the cause of Erin's wrong;  
The maker of our troubles, and the breaker of our  
bones;  
To keep him up he keeps us down, and grinds us on  
the stones. (O'Connor 2003: 383-84)

The commentary on the ballad states that most of these "Ancient Songs" were "first written down on a vessel journeying here to the

United States of Liberty”, yet its provenance is clearly suspect: ‘Revenge for Connemara’ is said to have been sung in December 1847 on a “vessel of martyrs” called “the *Star of the Oceans*”, and one of its sources is “a patriotic boy of about six years” (O’Connor 2003: 382-383). ‘Revenge for Connemara’ represents the conventional belief that the Famine was the fault of the “tyrant Saxon”; *Star of the Sea* reveals that the “tyrant Saxon” might have been an Irishman, that some Saxons were more likely to sacrifice their lives to save Irish people during the Famine than their own countrymen, and that the “maker of our troubles” might be closer to home:

I stress again that *Star of the Sea* is a novel and not at all a textbook about the Famine; but one thing I do hope it reveals is that the mythologies about the disaster on both extremes of the historical debate are reductive, disrespectful, and wrong, both morally and factually. While the British government’s relief efforts were often dismally ineffective, and the Irish poor were often regarded by their masters as a lesser form of life, some English people were humanitarian friends of the Irish, while some of the Irish – usually the wealthy ones – did absolutely nothing to alleviate the plight of the starving. (O’Connor 2005: 165)<sup>2</sup>

The first version of ‘Revenge for Connemara’, sung in Clifden Market in 1826, identifies the “tyrant Saxon” specifically with Merridith’s family: “*the tyrant lord of Carna and his breed that blights our isle*” (O’Connor 2003: 60, original emphasis). Merridith’s childhood sweetheart, the peasant Mary Duane, objects: “And this shite and ‘*raiméis*’ [nonsense] about ‘true native Connaughtmen’? Wasn’t His Lordship born thirteen miles out the road, like his father and six generations of his people before?” (O’Connor 2003: 60) The family tree from which Merridith’s gallows has sprung had been

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<sup>2</sup> One of the reductive analyses of the Famine O’Connor may be challenging is that of his sister, Sinéad O’Connor, who in her rap ‘Famine’ on her 1994 album *Universal Mother*, repeats the idea that food was “shipped out of the country under armed guard/ To England while the Irish people starved”, and traces contemporary Irish alcoholism, drug and child abuse, and violence directly back to the Famine: “We’re suffering from POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER” (S. O’Connor 1994).



rooted in Ireland around 1650, clearly part of the Cromwellian plantation. Yet to be born in Ireland does not equate to being a “true native”; Merridith’s blood, class and religion separate him from his tenants, and complicate his relationship with his homeland. He grows up “speaking the Irish he had learned from his father’s servants”, but with an accent honed at Winchester College: “‘Arland’ he’d say, when actually he meant Ireland. (Some of the people thought he was saying ‘*Our* land’ and thereby making some political point [...])” (O’Connor 2003: 63, original emphasis). Shortly before his death, Merridith says of Ireland: “Always felt sort of at home there before it all went wrong” (O’Connor 2003: 307), indicating his conflicting feelings of alienation and belonging. Knowing he is about to die, Merridith carefully dresses in the peasant clothes he has brought with him from Connemara, self-consciously ‘performing’ Irishness to meet a murder which will be read as the assassination of a foreign landlord.

Challenged about his nationality by the American journalist Dixon, Merridith reacts furiously:

My own mother died of famine fever, Dixon. [...] Caught it while feeding our tenants in ’22. [...] Saved a good many others in Galway, too. Mostly from the estate of a true-blood Irishman who would pimp Saint Bridget for two bob an hour. (O’Connor 2003: 132)

Margaret Kelleher has noted that in several Irish Big House novels, such as Edith Somerville’s *The Big House of Inver* (1925) and William Trevor’s *Fools of Fortune* (1983), there is a striking recurring motif: that of the female ancestor who has sacrificed her life to help the poor during the Great Famine. If in folk memory the Famine ancestor is often elided in shame, in Big House novels, dealing with the lives of the Irish Protestant gentry, the female Famine ancestor is “strangely necessary for the future of her community, her martyrdom constituting her descendants’ strongest claim to an Irish identity” (Kelleher 1997: 134). Merridith’s mother’s rescue of the evicted tenants of the “true-blood” Blakes (once Catholic, now Protestant converts), and her death during the earlier famine of 1822, validate her son’s Irishness. Her funeral, “the largest ever known in Galway”, attended by “Protestant and Catholic, planter and native, the rich and the ragged” alike (O’Connor 2003: 57-58), is an acknowledgment of

the community’s debt to her, and starkly contrasts the hurried burials of the poorer victims of the later Famine, and the treatment meted out to the poor, as well as his own family members, by her husband.

Merridith’s father, Lord Kingscourt, has little mercy as magistrate, landlord, husband or father. As a child Merridith is neglected, and threatened with whipping when he stammers; as an adult, he is disowned and exiled when he refuses to marry according to his father’s wishes. As the novel’s frequent allusions to *Hamlet* suggest, Merridith is defined by his relationship with his father: “Call him the son of the father who destroyed him” (O’Connor 2003: 398). Kingscourt is a war hero, but a domestic villain, a threat to his own family through his adultery, tyranny, and financial mismanagement, and to those of his tenants, whose rents he doubles and whom he threatens with eviction. His sentence of death on a man who killed a gamekeeper while stealing a lamb to feed his five starving children destroys both men’s families:

His children were sent into the almshouse at Galway, as, within the month, were the gamekeeper’s children. And the seven children fathered by killer and victim were buried in the same pit-grave before the year was through. (O’Connor 2003: 60)

Lord Kingscourt’s funeral is attended by the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland and most of the resident landlords, but none of the tenants come, people in Clifden turn their backs as the cortège passes, and drivers with shotguns accompany the coffin in case of attack. Even after burial, his father’s corpse is the target of loathing. Merridith finds that his father’s grave and those of his grandfather and other ancestors have been defaced, and his own name daubed on some of the tombstones. Only Lady Verity’s grave remains untouched.

At his father’s funeral – in a chapter with the ironically punning subtitle “In which David Merridith experiences a number of grave Reversals” (O’Connor 2003: 243) – Merridith is confronted with a (to him) more significant death, that of his nurse, Margaret Duane, who had “seemed a mother to him” (O’Connor 2003: 250). Merridith’s desire to pay his respects at the grave of Margaret and her husband exposes a guilty open secret: “Burke spoke very quietly, as though ashamed of a crime. ‘Their grave – it isn’t known, sir. They

died in Galway workhouse’” (O’Connor 2003: 251). If his real mother, Lady Verity, confirms his Irishness in her martyrdom, the death by starvation and burial in an anonymous mass grave of his almost-mother, Margaret Duane, allies Merridith to the “*breed that blights our isle*”. The whole family of Duane are destroyed by the Famine: Mary’s parents, her three sisters, and youngest and eldest brothers “died of starvation in the land of their birth” (O’Connor 2003: 398). Her surviving brother joins the Fenians and is killed in December 1867 in an explosion, while attempting to escape from Clerkenwell Prison in London, where he had been awaiting trial for the murder of a Manchester policeman. (In the corresponding real-life version of events, five men were convicted of murder, three of whom were hanged, and immortalised as the ‘Manchester martyrs’.)

The cruel fate of Mary Duane is particularly tied to both the Famine and the Merridith family. The illegitimate daughter of his father and his nurse, Mary was Merridith’s first love, discarded due to his father’s objections not to their unknowing incest, but to the breach of class barriers. Later, when she falls pregnant, Mary is abandoned by her subsequent lover, Pius Mulvey – the man who will be deputed to murder Merridith on the *Star of the Sea* – and rejected by her (step)father. Pius’s child is stillborn, and Mary’s daughter Alice-Mary (by her husband, Pius’s brother Nicholas) dies on Christmas Eve 1845 (the first year of the Famine), when a desperate Nicholas kills his own hungry child and commits suicide. Nicholas had tried to seek help from their landlord, Blake, but was refused, and his awful journey reinforces the traumatic consequences of the Famine for Irish families:

In one house at Glankeen the entire of a family had died [...]. Two neighbourmen told me the last to die, a boy of six or seven years, had locked the door and hidden under his bed, being ashamed for his people to be found in that way. The men were tumbling the cottage around them as a grave, having no other place to put them. (O’Connor 2003: 39)

An old woman on the road begs him to kill her “for all of her sons were gone and she was quite without support” (O’Connor 2003: 39-40). Nicholas’s pleas for food are rejected by peasants like himself, who fear that he carries fever, and whip him out “with shame and

scorn” (O’Connor 2003: 42). Nicholas, the little boy, and the old woman have been failed not just by landlords like Blake and Kingscourt, but by their own families and neighbours, who must live with the guilt of their self-preservation.

The bereft Mary is first forced into prostitution in Dublin, then into a more subtle subjection as the Merridiths’ nanny. Her presentation as “one of His Lordship’s charity cases: the local girl he rescued from beggary in Dublin” (O’Connor 2003: 48) masks Merridith’s role in her victimhood: his initial abandonment of her, his rediscovery of her in the brothel of which he was a client, and his exploitation of her vulnerability now she is without family and in his service. Merridith comes to Mary’s room nightly to watch her undress, and she is helpless to object from fear of being cast out. This abuse ends only on Merridith’s discovery that Mary is his sister; the revelation that his voyeurism is incestuous shocks him into acknowledging his culpability. “They were not Romeo and Juliet. They were master and servant”, says Dixon (O’Connor 2003: 398), yet the brother-sister relationship adds an extra dimension to this power nexus. The Montagues and Capulets of this story are socially and sexually imbricated. In making his archetypal Famine victim – or rather Famine survivor – Mary Duane a product of ethnic, religious and class miscegenation, O’Connor redefines both the Irish family (literal and microcosmic) and its implication in its own destruction.

Dixon’s reference to *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the novel’s many literary allusions to fractured relationships between lovers. The peasant girl betrayed is a staple of the Irish ballads Pius Mulvey learns to sing before he meets and betrays Mary: “The maiden expelled from her father’s home all for her love of the false young man. [...] The former lover encountered again, when time and experience have revealed the depth of lost love”, “a strange dark story about the seduction of a serving girl by a nobleman who had promised to make her his wife” (O’Connor 2003: 93-95). For Pius these ballads are “a means of saying things that could otherwise not be said in a frightened and occupied country” (O’Connor 2003: 94), suggesting an allegory of the Union, in which Ireland is a distressed and abandoned maiden and England her powerful male exploiter. However, the pervasive intertextual presence of another Victorian classic in *Star of the Sea*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), provides an alternative frame of reference for the story of Mary, Merridith and Pius. 1847 was

not only the worst year of the Famine, but also “an important anniversary in the history of fictions; when stories appeared in which people were starving, in which wives were jailed in attics and masters married servants” (O’Connor 2003: 388). *Wuthering Heights* is significant not just for the parallels Heathcliff and Cathy offer – lovers (possibly incestuous) separated by class, death by starvation, and revenge – but also formally; O’Connor, who has praised its structure as “very sophisticated and brave” (O’Connor 2005: 169), seeks to emulate its narrative inventiveness. Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Star of the Sea* offers “a montage of verbal forms: letters, quotation, first-person narrative, Hansard, captain’s log, snatches of ballad, advertisements, news-paper clippings, historical documentation” (Eagleton 2003: 26). One of *Star of the Sea*’s narrators is the ship’s captain, Josias Tuke Lockwood; Tuke relates him to an English Quaker family noted for its work in Ireland during the Famine, but Lockwood connects him to *Wuthering Heights*, and, like that novel’s narrator, O’Connor’s Lockwood is equally bewildered by the fierce realities around him. *Wuthering Heights* is also embedded in the murder plot; the threatening note “GET HIM. RIGHT SUNE. Els Be lybill. H.” is an anagram created from the title page “WUTHERING HEIGHTS by Ellis Bell”, with the “M” an inverted “W” (O’Connor 2003: 394-95).

Brontë was of course half-Irish herself, and Heathcliff, in as much as he might be “any kind of alien” found on the streets of Liverpool, is “quite possibly Irish” as well (Eagleton 1995: 3). Merridith claims that *Wuthering Heights* is “so clearly Connemara despite the clever way it’s disguised. Connemara, Yorkshire, all poor places” (O’Connor 2003: 138). O’Connor’s novel, which attempts to recover “the slow, painful, unrecorded deaths of those who meant nothing to their lords” (O’Connor 2003: 388), also questions the Anglo-centric bias of Victorian literature, and its appropriation of marginalised viewpoints and silenced histories. In a blatantly ironic revision, *Oliver Twist* (1838) turns out to be Connemara disguised too; Dickens, looking for “authentic” songs of London’s labouring classes, is conned by Mulvey’s “very old and extremely authentic” story about a Jewish pickpocket running a school for thieves:

When he ran out of inspiration he started stirring in  
details from Connemara ballads: the maiden betrayed

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by the false-hearted aristocrat, the girl of easy virtue  
murdered by her lover, the poor little waif sent into  
the workhouse. (O'Connor 2003: 190)

To the Jew, Mulvey gives the name of the anti-Semitic parish priest of his townland, Father Fagan. It is “an act of mutual robbery” by English novelist and Irish balladeer, replicated in the American Dixon’s appropriation of the stories of both nations in his *An American Abroad: Notes of London and Ireland in 1847*, and in O'Connor’s pastiche of the Victorian writers he admires: “Dickens, the Brontës, and Trollope were such brave writers, not afraid to use large casts of characters, real historical events, epic settings, and sometimes quite daring techniques of narration”, including “cliff-hangers, sudden epiphanies, daring revelations of information, sometimes outlandish coincidences” (O'Connor 2005: 169).

As Pius quickly discovers, Ireland without the disguise is not palatable in Victorian London, and his Connemara ballads are swiftly adapted to the local scene. Dixon attempts to get Thomas Cautley Newby (publisher of *Wuthering Heights*) to take his stories about Ireland, without success: “Morbidity of thing. All that stuff about poor Pat and his donkey, you see” (O'Connor 2003: 122). Dickens can accommodate the poor because he “puts in jokes”, while Trollope whose first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), has just been published, gets away with his Irish setting because he “does the poor but he sort of smuggles them in” (O'Connor 2003: 125, 122). While *Star of the Sea* plays host to “a roll call of belletristic London” (O'Connor 2003: 229-30) – Lewes, Carlyle, Mayhew, Ruskin and Tennyson are among those who make an appearance – O'Connor smuggles in his Irish authors. Boucicault is the only Irish writer to grace Laura Merridith’s “evenings”, and O'Connor’s references to other nineteenth-century Irish writers are playfully coded. Irish poets such as Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan are credited in footnotes with translating material for Dixon. Lady Verity’s kinship to Francis Beaufort is noted, but not that this links the Merridiths by marriage to Maria Edgeworth (whose half-sister Honora was Beaufort’s wife). Lady Verity is buried by the Rector of Drumcliffe, Rev. Pollexfen, who later engages in relief works during the Famine, and intervenes for the tenants with Merridith’s father; Pollexfen was the surname of W. B. Yeats’s mother, Susan, and the actual Rector of

Drumcliffe in the years during which the novel is set was John Yeats, Yeats's great-grandfather. Oscar Wilde appears euphemistically as "another flamboyant Irishman" (O'Connor 2003: 393).

The Irish writers O'Connor chooses to foreground are poor, some near-illiterate, sending letters across the Atlantic to family members who have emigrated, or writing back home to Ireland. Many chapters replicate this factual correspondence in their epigraphs. "I cant let you know how we are suffering unless you were in Starvation and want without freind or fellow to give you a Shilling" writes a mother to her son in Rhode Island; a Kilkenny woman more openly begs her son in America: "patt, for the honour of our lord Jasus christ and his Blessed Mother hurry and take us out of this" (O'Connor 2003: 32, 44). Miller (whose books *Emigrants and Exiles* and *Out of Ireland* are credited in the Acknowledgments as the source of the letters O'Connor quotes) estimates that between 1848 and 1900 over £52 million was sent back to Ireland by Irish emigrants to North America, perhaps in response to appeals such as these, some forty percent of which consisted of prepaid passage tickets allowing family members to emigrate (Miller 1985: 357).

Pius Mulvey, a pre-Famine emigrant to England, is tormented by the thought that he is a father who has abandoned his family:

Thoughts of his own father's fortitude tormented his dreams, of his mother's loyalty and endless work for her sons. Blights had come and gone and his parents had never left him. How had he repaid their memory for all their love? Deserted the only grandchild who would ever bear their name. (O'Connor 2003: 216)

He will eventually be responsible for the deaths of his brother Nicholas and his niece Alice-Mary; his jealous campaign against Nicholas and Mary leads to their eviction and Nicholas's desperate acts of infanticide and suicide. Mulvey has murdered two men in England, but his worst crime is his betrayal of his brother. To take the land of an evicted neighbour was a heinous enough offence in Ireland, where possession of land meant life, but Mulvey has taken his own brother's land. When he is recognised on board ship, he is barely rescued from the wrath of his fellow steerage passengers, outraged by

his breach of family loyalty: “You murdered him! You murdered your brother!” (O’Connor 2003: 225-26).

The fraternal relationship is portrayed with peculiar intensity in this novel, which ends with a reference to the primal brother murder: “All the way back to Cain” (O’Connor 2003: 405). Merridith’s older brother David had died horribly in infancy, having fallen in the fire; like Heathcliff, who is given the name of a dead Earnshaw son, Merridith’s parents call him by his middle name, David, as if to keep alive the memory of this lost child. Brothers provide the opportunity for alternative identities: Merridith’s son Jonathan covers his brother Robert with his own urine-soaked sheet, to conceal his shameful bed-wetting. Two passengers on the *Star of the Sea*, the Maharajah Ranjitsinji and his servant, are revealed at the end of the novel to be conmen brothers, George and Thomas Clarke, born in Liverpool to an Irish mother and Portuguese father; Dixon rediscovers them in a travelling show in South Dakota as “Bam-Bam Bombay, the Sultan of the Strangle-hold” and his ringside second (O’Connor 2003: 401). Primogeniture is reversed in this relationship, with the younger brother taking the prestige positions of Maharajah and Sultan, the older serving him. Pius, an inveterate shape-shifter, briefly steals his older brother’s identity in Belfast, but it “seemed a kind of indecency; too severe an act of colonisation” (O’Connor 2003: 181); Nicholas, in his marriage to Mary, takes Pius’s place as husband and father. The hybrid Clarkes thrive through their exploitation of an imaginary exoticism; the Mulveys are destroyed by their introverted “colonisation”.

Brothers are indeterminate, queer even; Merridith, disturbed by two black sailors sharing a mug, muses: “They looked so close; like brothers perhaps. There were other varieties of closeness between men” (O’Connor 2003: 146-147). Pius and Nicholas, “[r]aised in the practically incestuous closeness of Connemara”, sleep together in the bed where they had been conceived and born, and in which Pius fears they will also die: “No bedmate, ever, except for each other. The hills of Connemara abounded with such men. Bent, dead-eyed, ancient brothers who shuffled through life with the cross of loneliness on their backs” (O’Connor 2003: 180, 89). The murdered Alice-Mary seems the spectral child of both brothers; Pius’s abandonment of the pregnant Mary leads to her marriage to Nicholas, and Alice-Mary takes the place of Pius’s stillborn child. She is killed by her father, but



Mary implicates Pius: "It's yourself did it and you know it, too. As certain as if you held her down in the water and squeezed the life from her body with your own murderer's hands. [...] The child of your own brother? That your people's blood was running in?" (O'Connor 2003: 297). Significantly, when Dixon offers to fabricate Pius's death in exchange for his story, Pius's fantasy ending is reconciliation with Nicholas: "I'm buried in Galway. Beside my brother" (O'Connor 2003: 334). His actual fate proves far less peaceful; a year after his arrival in New York, on the feast-day of St Nicholas, Pius is "knifed to pieces", tortured, disfigured, his heart "cut out and flung in the gutter" by other Irish emigrants (O'Connor 2003: 400). "Had he murdered David Merridith he might have been a hero", Dixon comments; his betrayal of his family would have been forgiven if he had been able "to murder for a cause" (O'Connor 2003: 401). The fact that Merridith's blood also runs in Alice-Mary (she is Merridith's niece as well as Pius's) exposes the internecine futility of that cause, and perhaps also of later Irish ideological murders.

O'Connor offers a more redemptive vision through Mary's refusal to enact her revenge. She is given an opportunity to deny that Pius is her relation in order to prevent him taking a seat on the lifeboat used to escape from the quarantined *Star of the Sea*, but is reminded by another passenger of the horror of leaving a family member to die: "Far too many in Ireland had done it before. So many had turned against their own blood now" (O'Connor 2003: 372-373). This passenger, who will die in consequence, gives up his seat for Pius in the name of his own family, including the emigrant children who have never forgotten him:

He was only here himself because of natural family love; his children in Boston had sent him the fare. They had little enough but they had scraped every penny to do it. Often they themselves had gone hungry just to save him. [...] He could not disgrace their name by standing in the way of family. His wife in Heaven would weep for his honour if he did. (O'Connor 2003: 373)

Instead of denying her living family, Mary chooses to remember her dead daughter, and she is joined by the other mothers in reciting the names of their lost children:

As though the act of saying their names – the act of saying they ever had names – was to speak the only prayer that can ever begin to matter in a world that turns its eyes from the hungry and the dying. They were real. They existed. They were held in these arms. They were born, and they lived, and they died. (O'Connor 2003: 374)

These Famine victims, buried in unmarked graves or on the ocean floor, are disinterred in their mothers' memories, made real by the utterance of their names.

Ó Gráda argues that the reluctance of Famine victims to speak of their experiences has led to “a version of famine history in which the descendants of those who survived all become vicarious victims” (Ó Gráda 1999: 212). O'Connor explicitly critiques this communal trauma-memory, and the amnesia of those who benefitted from the Famine, many of whom were Irish-born: the most successful Famine survivors are the Blakes, who make a fortune through evictions, and become “active in Irish politics” (O'Connor 2003: 395). Merridith, on the other hand, is identified as one of the “violated people” (O'Connor 2003: 388); like Pius, he is both victim and perpetrator.

The murder of Merridith, which seems so tied to the politics of land and Famine, is revealed at the end of the novel to be motivated by love of family on the part of both victim and killer. Merridith, dying of syphilis, invites his own death by himself constructing the threatening letter to Mulvey from the title page of *Wuthering Heights*. Dixon acknowledges that Merridith was “a remarkably brave man” who “wanted to spare his family the shame of a pariah's death” (O'Connor 2003: 395); his sons are also eligible for private education if their father is murdered, but not if he dies from syphilis or by suicide. It is Dixon, not Mulvey, who kills Merridith, and he pointedly compares his crime of passion to the actions of a patriot: “Love and freedom are such hideous words. So many cruelties have been done in their names” (O'Connor 2003: 404-405). Merridith's wife Laura is pregnant with Dixon's child, and he knows she will never leave her

husband while he lives. Dixon's daughter, Verity Mary Merridith Dixon, does not fulfil the complex heritage (and perhaps recompense) implied by her blood and her name, being born prematurely and dying soon after. Merridith's sons Jonathan and Robert take Dixon's name, but Dixon's actions fail to found a family. Dixon and Laura marry, but they cannot have children after Verity Mary's death, and eventually divorce. Robert marries three times, but appears not to have children; Jonathan's homosexuality makes it unlikely that he will sire any offspring. Notably the brothers "never talk about Ireland now. They tend to say they were born in America" (O'Connor 2003: 403).

Dixon suspects that Mary, like the Merridith brothers, "changed her name and began a new life, as did so many hundreds of thousands of the Irish in America" (O'Connor 2003: 399-400), repressing the memory of Famine experiences. This abandoned, bereaved, exploited Famine emigrant is glimpsed as a prostitute, prisoner and vagrant in America, and her disappearance haunts the end of *Star of the Sea*, as it does O'Connor's next novel, *Redemption Falls* (2007), which follows Mary's children Eliza (also Pius's daughter) and Jeremiah in the aftermath of the American Civil War, during which 80,000 Irishmen fought for the Union, against a Confederate army containing 20,000 of their countrymen (O'Connor 2003: 387). As Eliza realises, passing through "ghost towns" and "bread riots" in 1865, "[t]he past is not over [...] and the future has happened many times" (O'Connor 2007: 6).

Revealingly, Dixon also relates the Famine to ongoing oppression and exploitation in Ireland seventy years later:

For the dead do not die in that tormented country, that heartbroken island of incestuous hatreds; so abused down the centuries by the powerful of the neighbouring island, as much by the powerful of its native own. (O'Connor 2003: 388)

The Famine is "one of the reasons they still die today". As his narrative ends, on Easter Saturday 1916, "the poor of both islands" are dying together on the battlefields of the Great War, and unknown to Dixon, the latest in a long line of Irish rebellions against "the neighbouring island", the Easter Rising, is commencing in Dublin. O'Connor also draws very clear parallels with the end of the twentieth

century. Lockwood moves to Connemara with his wife, to “stand in solidarity with the Irish famished” (O’Connor 2003: 396); Dixon credits him and other English Quakers with saving thousands of Irish lives, and his heroic efforts lead to his death from famine fever. His sacrifice is prompted by his conviction that the Irish would never have turned their backs on refugees: “if Ireland were a richer land and other nations now mighty were distressed [...] the people of Ireland would welcome the frightened stranger with that gentleness and friendship which so ennoble their character” (O’Connor 2003: 279). O’Connor is well aware that this has not been the case in modern Ireland, and intends his readers to grasp the irony – but also the logic – of Lockwood’s naïve assurance:

You’d think because of our history we’d be incredibly welcoming and nice to [immigrants], but we have the same levels of racism and xenophobia as any other country in Europe – it’s as if our history means measurably nothing. [The Irish] don’t seem to realise people from Africa and Eastern Europe are pretty much in the same position their ancestors were in the 1850s. (O’Connor, qtd. Palmer 2003)

Ireland changed dramatically in the last decades of the twentieth century, and Foster suggests that “immigration may prove to be one of the defining characteristics of Irishness in the twenty-first century, just as emigration did in the twentieth” (Foster 2007: 150). Between 1995 and 2000, almost a quarter of a million immigrants arrived in Ireland, attracted by the booming economy (Fanning 2004: 75).<sup>3</sup> Applications for asylum in Ireland rose from a mere 39 in 1992 to 11,632 in 2002, but few of these applications were successful in the first instance – only 4% in 2003 (Lentin 2007: 8). The Irish government has suggested that the decline in applications is proof of the success of Ireland’s asylum policies, but “omits to mention that increasing numbers – about 4,000 per annum in 2004 and 2005 – were refused leave to land to present asylum applications” (Lentin 2007: 8-

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<sup>3</sup>Fanning estimates that approximately half were returned Irish immigrants; 18% were from the UK, 13% from other EU countries, 7% from the United States, 12% from the rest of the world (Fanning 2004: 75).

9). Lockwood's belief that the "frightened stranger" would be welcomed in a wealthy Ireland has been resoundingly disproved. Less than a decade after Mary Robinson called for the diaspora to be cherished, a Citizenship Referendum was held to decide if children born in Ireland to immigrant parents should be granted automatic Irish citizenship; 80% of the population voted against such entitlement (Onyejelem 2005: 75). The 1998 Good Friday Agreement reiterated a *jus soli* definition of Irishness whereby everyone born on the island of Ireland is entitled to Irish citizenship, and yet the Irish-born children of migrants have been repeatedly deported (Fanning 2004: 73). In contrast, Robinson's "extended Irish family abroad" were protected – the 1.8 million holders of Irish passports not born in Ireland but claiming Irish citizenship by virtue of having one Irish grandparent retained their rights (Lentin 2007: 8). The Irish family at home elected to exclude and marginalise on the basis of ethnicity, recognising third-generation New Yorkers as 'family', while labelling born and bred Dubliners 'foreign'. The "incestuous hatreds" which made an Irish Protestant such as David Merridith an "Englishman born in Ireland" in the nineteenth century, have been transferred to more vulnerable internal and external others in twentieth- and twenty-first-century 'multicultural' Ireland.

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